

**THE MOTIVATION AND DECISION-MAKING PROCESS  
OF ELEMENTARY EDUCATION MAJORS IN HAWAI'I**

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### Abstract

Choice of a college major is an important decision that college students make because it guides their personal, academic, and career goals. Although there is research on what motivates students to pursue a major in general, there is a lack of in-depth literature on motivation for specific majors. Because of the need for more teachers in Hawai‘i, this study focused on what motivated students to major in elementary education. This qualitative study used a grounded theory approach to study the motivation and decision-making process of first year elementary education majors at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa. Twelve students were interviewed. A theoretical model was developed that describes how early student experiences, interactions with others, and engagement activities shaped students’ understandings of the teaching profession, and led to their decision to major in elementary education. Nine students initially majored in another subject, but switched to education for reasons such as having experiences in their original field that did not match with their interests or they struggled academically. Before committing to the major, students reflected on how well it fit them and the challenges they were willing to overcome, such as the desire to improve classroom management skills. Students reflected on how their experiences in the program had met their expectations and validated their choice of major.

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## **The Motivation and Decision-Making Process of Elementary Education Majors in Hawai'i**

### **Introduction**

One decision that college students face involves the choice of a college major. This choice can influence their future career outlook. There have been both qualitative and quantitative studies on variables that influence a student's college major choice that examined predictors for and reasons why students go into certain fields (Beggs, Bantham, & Taylor, 2008; Liao & Ji, 2015; Malgwi, Howe, & Burnaby, 2005; Tang, Pan, & Newmeyer, 2008). Baxter Magolda and King (2012) suggested that self-authorship, the questioning of external authorities and construction of an internal voice, occurs during college years. Students develop their identities and find ways to integrate them into their futures.

One of the limitations of the literature on major choice is that much of it focuses on either undecided or decided students in general, and fewer studies focus on motivational variables related to choosing specific majors. I was interested in focusing this study on students who decided to major in elementary education because of the current push for teacher recruitment and retention in Hawai'i. According to teacher recruitment data from the 2016-2017 school year, the Hawai'i Department of Education (DOE) had 531 vacancies or 4% of total positions (Krieg, 2016). The DOE is focused on initiatives that encourage more people to pursue a degree that leads to teacher certification in Hawai'i and those that retain current teachers. Given the teacher shortage and attention to attracting more people to a degree in education, I was interested in finding out why current students chose to major in elementary education.

## **Literature Review**

Using grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2015), I explored the decision-making process for students who chose to major in elementary education in Hawai‘i. I reviewed the literature on college major choice along with that on teacher motivation in order to better understand students’ decision-making processes when choosing an elementary education major over other possible options. The literature on college major choice focuses on general reasons why students choose a major. Teacher motivation refers to specific reasons for wanting to become a teacher. I will first review the literature on motivational variables that students consider when choosing a college major and also compare it to variables that students consider when deciding to become a teacher. My research focused on student reported motivation and not predictors of major choice (gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, political orientation, etc.) because I was interested in understanding how students’ perceptions of majors and careers influenced their decision to study that field. Lastly, I looked at literature that explained types of engagement and sources of information that students use to choose a major.

### **Motivational Variables**

**Personal interests.** Past studies have shown that personal interest in a subject was the most influential variable in choosing a major. Beggs et al. (2008) defined this as “match(ing) with (a student’s) personal interests and/or strengths” (para. 7). One study compared Taiwanese students’ personal, others’, career, and institutional preferences for choosing a college major (Liao & Ji, 2015). This study found a positive relationship between personal preference, defined as a student’s self-interest, self-aptitude, and self-competence, and academic commitment. Academic commitment was defined as a combination of personal interest, competency, and value of a major to the student. Malgwi et al. (2005) also found that interest in a subject was the

most important variable related to incoming freshmen at a business school and was also the primary reason why students changed their major.

Personal interest also influenced students who chose to enter a teaching profession (Barmby, 2006; Kyriacou & Coulthard, 2000; Manuel & Hughes, 2006; Moran, Kilpatrick, Abbott, Dallat, & McClune, 2001; Richardson & Watt, 2006). Studies showed that the majority of students went into teaching for intrinsic and altruistic reasons compared to extrinsic ones. Manuel and Hughes (2006) found that personal fulfillment and enjoyment of a subject were the top reasons for going into teaching. The need for intellectual fulfillment and to serve others were also ranked high (Moran et al., 2001). Education students saw teaching as something they always wanted to do, a future aspiration, and fulfillment of a dream. Yet, previous researchers did not specify how students formulated how they knew this was something they wanted to do (Barmby, 2006; Manuel & Hughes, 2006). The current study attempted to answer this question.

**Job and Career Characteristics.** The characteristics of a job and the financial security it provides can influence college major choice. The job characteristics variable was ranked right below match with interests and attributes of a major as an important reason for choosing a major (Beggs et al., 2008). These job characteristics included availability of jobs, flexibility of career paths, and job security. It can also include opportunity for promotion and overall salary. Liao and Ji (2015) found that career preference had a significant, positive relationship with academic commitment for Taiwanese students, despite the influence of a collectivistic culture that emphasized the influence of others' (e.g., family, peers) preferences. Certain characteristics may also be more important for a specific gender. For example, potential job opportunities and career advancement was found in one study to be more important to men compared to women (Malgwi et al., 2005).

The teaching motivation literature includes studies on job characteristics that attracted students to teaching. Desire to work with children and adolescents, to have a sense of vocation, and to make a social contribution were ranked high as reasons to teach (Moran et al., 2001; Richardson & Watt, 2006). Students also felt that teaching offered favorable working conditions (Hammond, 2002; Kyriacou & Coulthard, 2000). Previous experience with teaching and perceived teaching ability were also found to influence students' decisions to become teachers (Barmby, 2006; Hammond, 2002; Richardson & Watt, 2006).

Some studies focused on the reasons students did not want to become teachers. The heavy workload, dealing with pupil behavior, and lack of school funding were variables that dissuaded students (Barmby, 2006; Kyriacou & Coulthard, 2000; Kyriacou & Kunc, 2007). College students who did not want to become teachers believed that the teaching profession did not allow for job promotion and high enough earnings over their careers (Kyriacou & Coulthard, 2000). They suggested that they might change their mind about teaching if there were increases in high quality resources and salaries, and improvements in the work environment. This showed that students had specific perceptions of the teaching profession and offered insights on variables that kept students from majoring in education. For the current study, I was interested in aspects of teaching that could be discouraging to pre-service teachers, where they received this information from, and how they were able to overcome these negative perceptions.

**Major and college attributes.** Major and college attributes can also influence a student's major choice. These are attributes that are specific to a major or college, such as a program's reputation, faculty, coursework, and recruitment methods (Beggs et al., 2008; Liao & Ji, 2015; Malgwi et al., 2005). One study found that students ranked major attributes as the second most important, compared to other variables (Beggs et al., 2008). However Liao and Ji (2015)

indicated that institutional preference was ranked lowest and Malgwi et al. (2005) found the value of college reputation and attending a college open house were low-ranked as well. The teacher motivation literature did not emphasize how a school's program and college reputation influenced students going into teaching.

**Social Influences.** Some studies took into account the importance that students placed on others' influence such as family, teachers, peers, and counselors (Liao & Ji, 2015; Malgwi et al., 2005). These variables were ranked low compared to personal, career, and other variables. Beggs et al. (2008) combined recommendations from people and career planning tools into one variable called information search. They found that information search also ranked low as a reason for major choice and argued that students were somehow getting information in order to know if they were interested in a subject and to understand job characteristics. They recommended that future studies distinguish information search from other variables related to the major choice process.

The teacher motivation literature also indicated that students looked to others for guidance and support. One study found that students looked to their families and teachers for inspiration and also looked up to mentors who encouraged them to go into teaching (Manuel & Hughes, 2006). However, Moran et al. (2001) found that the influence of others was an extrinsic factor and ranked low for reasons students went into teaching. Some authors reflected that others' influence can have a negative impact, as a form of a social dissuasion away from teaching (Manuel & Hughes, 2006; Richardson & Watt, 2006).

### **Types of Engagement in the Decision-Making Process**

Various tools and information are available to help students choose their major. Some authors suggested the use of assessments to help students find the right fit (Brott, 2004; Holland,



1997). Holland (1997) theorized six personality types: realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, and conventional, that fit particular work environments. Porter and Umbach (2006) found that Holland's theory and instruments predicted student major choice.

Different career decision theorists analyzed the decision-making process and recommended ways that advisors can assist students. Advisors can talk with students, figure out where they are in the developmental trajectory, and help students realize the need for exploration. However, Cox, Bjornsen, Krieshok, and Liu (2016), stressed that assisting students must go beyond the introspection stage and include a push towards occupational engagement. According to Krieshok, Black, and McKay, occupational engagement is defined as "taking part in behaviors that contribute to the decision maker's fund of information and experience of the larger world" (as cited in Cox et al., 2016, p. 169). This involves opportunities for students to participate in activities that give them experience within a career field. Occupational engagement may include participation in internships, volunteering, part time work, interviews, job shadowing, and joining clubs. Cox et al. (2016) found that occupational engagement positively predicted vocational identity, or an increase in students' clarity of the connection between work-related goals and personal interests and strengths.

For the purpose of this study, I will be using the definition of engagement as described by Cox et al. (2016) when referring to activities related to occupational engagement. This is comparable to the definition of student involvement in higher education, which Astin (1984) defined as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (p. 518). It is different from student engagement as defined in higher education research that tends to refer to students' participation in campus activities and the institution's role in keeping students engaged (Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009).

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore undergraduate college students' decision-making processes when choosing to major in elementary education. This study used a grounded theory approach because the goal was to analyze and understand the process of committing to a major in elementary education. My research question was "What motivated students to pursue a major in elementary education in Hawai'i?" There were three sub-questions: (a) Why did students choose to major in elementary education? (b) What kinds of engagement activities and informational resources did students utilize to make this decision? (c) How did students overcome deterrents or discouragement in order to major in elementary education?

## **Methods**

I used a grounded theory approach to understand the process of a college student committing to an elementary education major (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). According to Creswell and Poth (2018), the grounded theory approach looks at actions, interactions, and social processes of people based on data collected from individuals. I chose this approach because I wanted to understand students' perceptions of majoring in elementary education and to find out what kinds of actions and interactions helped them make this decision.

## **Participants**

Participants included 12 undergraduate elementary education majors in the first year of their teacher licensure cohort program at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa (UHM). Although Creswell and Poth (2018) suggested that grounded theory methods require 20-60 people, I recruited only 12 participants for my thesis because I felt that given my time constraints, they could give me enough insight to this decision-making process. This decision was validated

through saturation, in that toward the end of my data collection process, I began to hear similar responses from multiple participants.

I recruited first-year students because I assumed that they recently made a decision to major in elementary education and would have had some experience in the program to reflect on whether an education major was the right fit for them. The students were in a cohort-based two-year program. I chose to focus only on students who were in the elementary education program because the motivation to become an elementary teacher could be different than the motivation to become a secondary education teacher. This is a form of homogeneous sampling, or sampling that reduces participants to a group that has experienced the same process, which in this case was students who chose to major in elementary education (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I sought recruitment assistance from elementary education cohort coordinators at UHM. I presented my study to three first-year cohort classes, and the 12 students volunteered and signed an informed consent form. See the table below for information on their demographic backgrounds.

Table 1 presents the participants and their demographic information. The participants' ages ranged from 20-28 years old. The group consisted of seven females, four males, and one non-binary student. Half of the participants were born and raised in Hawai'i. Although all students were pursuing a B.Ed. in Elementary Education, four participants were also pursuing a program that would lead to them being licensed in both elementary and special education (ESEE). One participant was in the Elementary Education and Early Childhood Education (ECE) dual preparatory program. Nine out of the twelve participants also pursued other majors before majoring in elementary education.

## **Interviews**

I conducted individual semi-structured interviews with the participants to explore the decision-making process they experienced to become elementary education majors. See the appendix for a list of the interview questions. I interviewed the participants for about 30-60 minutes at locations that were convenient for them, such as on campus and at a local coffee shop. The interviews were audio recorded on my phone and tablet and then transcribed. One student, Shane, was interviewed twice because my device did not record the first interview properly. After I transcribed the interviews, I asked four students for clarification on their responses.

Table 1  
*Participant Demographic Information*

| Name    | Age | Gender     | Race/Ethnicity                      | From Hawai‘i | Major              | Original major/field of interest       |
|---------|-----|------------|-------------------------------------|--------------|--------------------|--|
| Brooke  | 21  | Female     | White                               | No           | ESEE               | Nursing                                |
| Brycen  | 25  | Male       | Asian                               | Yes          | ESEE               | Culinary arts                          |
| Denise  | 21  | Female     | Filipino                            | Yes          | General            | Education                              |
| Faith   | 22  | Female     | Japanese                            | Yes          | General            | Kinesiology and Rehabilitation Science |
| Jackson | 28  | Male       | White                               | No           | ESEE               | Education                              |
| Jessica | 22  | Female     | Japanese, Chinese, Korean           | No           | General            | Education                              |
| Kailee  | 20  | Female     | Japanese, Korean, Okinawan          | Yes          | General            | Biochemistry                           |
| Kay     | 26  | Female     | Columbian, Hawaiian, Irish, Italian | No           | General            | Criminal Justice                       |
| Ren     | 26  | Male       | Asian                               | No           | ESEE               | Automotive Technology                  |
| Shane   | 21  | Male       | Japanese                            | Yes          | General            | Psychology                             |
| Tammy   | 28  | Female     | Japanese, White                     | Yes          | General            | English (Secondary Education)          |
| Taylor  | 20  | Non-binary | White                               | No           | Elementary and ECE | Nursing                                |

Note. ESEE = Exceptional Students and Elementary Education; ECE = Early Childhood Education.

## **Data Analysis**

After transcription, I used a grounded theory method of analysis as developed by Corbin and Strauss (2015) and further discussed by Creswell and Poth (2018). This technique includes memoing, open coding, axial coding, and selective coding to form themes that related to a central process. I used memoing to write down important ideas as data were collected and analyzed. Open coding involved looking at the transcripts for salient categories that characterized the process. From there, I identified a central process or phenomenon that was integral to the overall process. I then used axial coding, the process of looking over the data and connecting themes to the chosen central phenomenon. Lastly, selective coding was conducted to form propositions or statements that described the relationships between the themes. After coding, I combined similar properties under different themes.

## **Role of the Researcher**

I chose to focus on the topic of college major choice because I experienced indecision in choosing a major during my first years of college. I originally majored in engineering because my family wanted me to become an engineer and to represent women in the field. However, I did not enjoy learning about engineering and realized that I cared more about helping people and wanted to find a major that focused on that. This led me to major in psychology for my undergraduate degree and eventually in educational psychology for my master's degree. My personal major change inspired me to study why students choose certain fields and to find ways professionals can better assist them. I believe that students need to do their research and engage in activities and programs that will help them make the best major choice.

I am a graduate student in the UHM College of Education, and I am pursuing my M.Ed. in educational psychology. I previously worked with undergraduate education majors in the

College of Education Student Association (CESA) for a semester and assisted with graduate student outreach. I contacted faculty in the elementary education cohort programs at UHM to recruit participants, but did not work with any of them previously. I also worked at UHM as a peer advisor which involves talking to students individually and providing recommendations and assistance on college matters. This may have influenced my interviewing style because I naturally give therapeutic support and offer solutions to issues that students raise. I was cautious of this and refrained from giving guidance as an advisor during the interviews, but discussed appropriate resources and shared advice after the interviews if the student inquired.

**Potential Biases.** My role as a student in the College of Education may have influenced the participants to respond in more favorable ways because they may have wanted to represent the college in only positive ways. I also have a personal bias of seeing teaching as an important profession that needs recruitment support. I believe that education can open many doors for students and that teachers deserve to have the right resources and training in order to better support students. With this belief, I often encourage students to consider the teaching profession as a way to give back to the community. However, I also believe that students should pursue a major that best fits their career and life goals, so I embraced this more neutral standpoint when interviewing my participants.

In order to guard against my potential biases, I encouraged students to openly express their perspectives and opinions. I also corresponded with four participants after transcription to clarify certain responses. Finally I reflected on my positionality and ways that my background could have influenced the data collection and analyses.

## **Results**

### **Theoretical Model**

Through my grounded theory analysis, I identified the central phenomenon of students making a conscious decision to enter the field of elementary education. Students had different experiences that led to majoring in elementary education. After students made this decision, it further guided their behaviors such as completing prerequisite courses in order to get accepted into the program. See Figure 1 for a visual depiction of the model.

The model starts with the individual, which represents the participants in this study. Their decisions were shaped by experiences as students, then influenced by others such as family, peers, and mentors. This then led to the participants getting involved in engagement activities which included programs and other types of experiences that related to elementary education. When deciding on a major, students went through a period of self-reflection in which they considered the fit of the major and possible challenges they might encounter. This was then followed by the conscious decision of a major or field. Nine participants pursued other majors before choosing elementary education, but found that there were aspects of those majors that did not fit with what they wanted. These students then revisited their past experiences and decided to major in elementary education. Students also shared about their experiences in the elementary education program and how these experiences validated their perceived fit of the major. In the sections below, I discuss each aspect of the model.



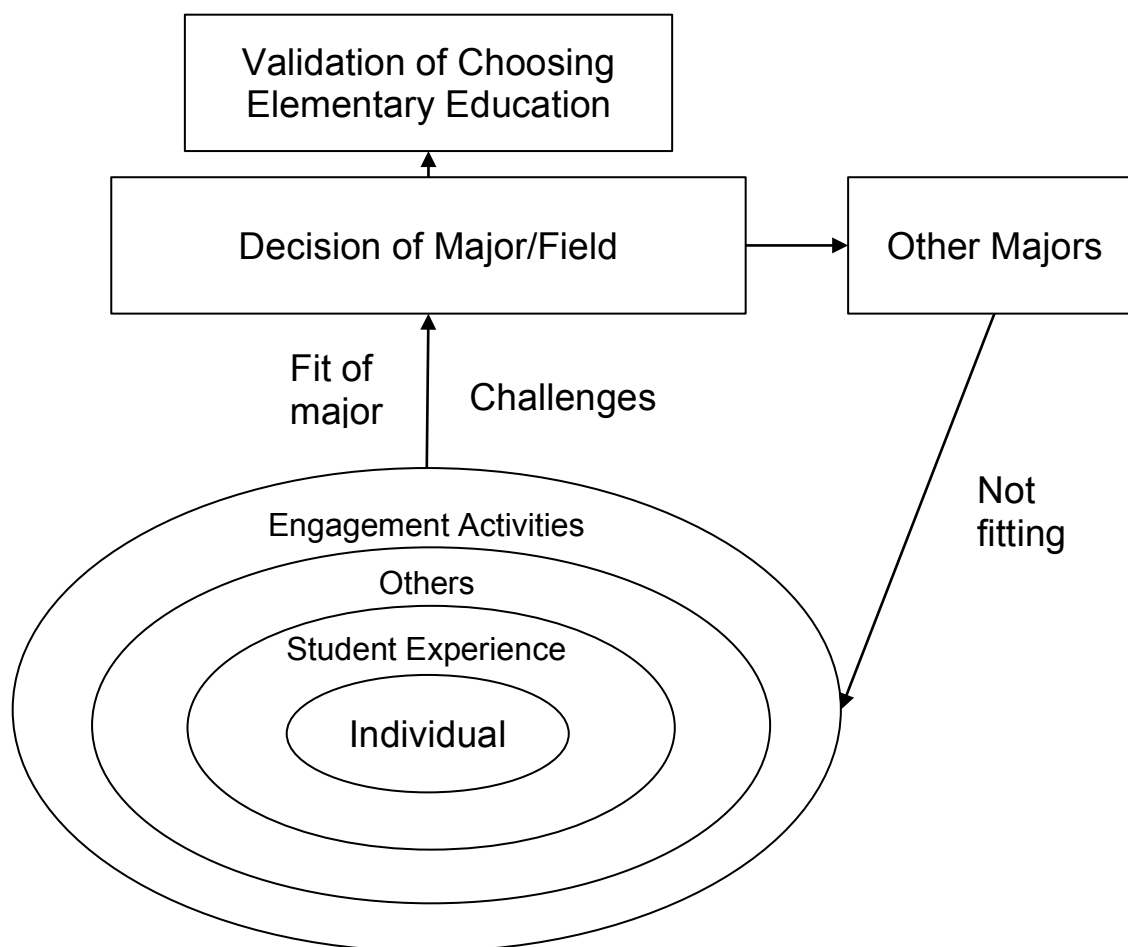


Figure 1. Decision-making process of an individual choosing elementary education.

### Early Experiences as Students

Six of the participants reflected on the influence of past teachers that sparked their initial interest to become a teacher. They said that they remembered a teacher who encouraged them in their learning. One student, Denise, shared an experience with two different teachers in elementary school:

I had this other teacher who made me not like math because she would criticize me. And this was in the first grade. So it kinda traumatized me . . . and then it wasn't until that fifth grade teacher came into my life, and she was like, "No, you can do it." So she stayed

with me every day after school, and she just made everything so much easier. . . . And then, I just was like you know, that's what I want to do. Make that kind of difference in people's lives.

Another participant, Taylor, remembered a kindergarten teacher who was influential and also wanted to be remembered by students in that way.

Some students had teachers who were models for them in that the students recognized that they could also become teachers. For example, two of the four male participants shared the impact of a male teacher on their decision to go into education. Jackson reflected on how his dad wanted him to pursue an outdoor profession because of the town he grew up in. Jackson shared,

I had a 4th grade teacher who was male. And he was still like this very outdoorsy hunter, but a teacher too, so I'm like "Oh, guys CAN do this job, okay cool." And then yeah, I kinda always wanted to be a teacher since then.

Another male student, Ren, shared,

Yeah, my sophomore year in high school, I had my first male teacher ever, other than one male teacher for P.E. . . . Not only was he a male, but he was far above any of the other high school teachers I had that were female . . . . [He] knew his stuff, and he came to class like not wearing sports shorts and a T-shirt . . . . [I liked] the way that he engaged his students, really liking just the passion that he had for the subject.

Four participants shared that, as students, they had opportunities to help their classmates learn difficult material or aided their teachers in the classroom. These experiences influenced their desire to become teachers. Taylor reflected on experience as a student and said:

It made me realize that I do a lot of interpreting. So when a teacher explains something, I'm always the student that understands it first. And then I explain and I interpret it to a

way that other kids can understand. And knowing that I have that diverse way of thinking, I want to be a teacher so I can bring that to a classroom.

Five of the participants shared that they struggled academically or behaviorally as students growing up. Kay said,

Yeah, so I never would have thought that I would have been a teacher, because of my experience in school. I just, I was more of a rebel, *kolohe* (rascal). I just never really meshed with the teachers in that aspect.

Although a lot of the participants said they were initially inspired to become teachers through their experiences in school growing up, nine of them initially pursued other majors or fields of interest. The influence of others and involvement in different engagement activities were other sources that motivated the students to go into education.

### **Influence of Others**

As described above, the participants were influenced by past teachers. In addition, other people in their lives influenced them to major in education. These other people included family members, peers, and people in the community who knew the students well. Seven of the participants shared that they had family members who were either educators or served as aides in the classroom. Some of these family members informed the participants of what it was like to work in education or connected the students to opportunities within the field. When I asked Brooke how she figured out what she wanted do for a career, she said:

Parent guidance (laughs) My mom really, she helped me a lot. Because she recently went into teaching . . . she aides for SPED [special education] at my old high school. So she was like, “You’d actually love this” like “This is so you!” And so . . . it was mostly her.

Faith shared that people noticed that she enjoyed working with children. She explained:

Yeah, even when I hang around my mom's friends' kids and stuff, they always tell me "You should be teacher!" and I'm like "Oh, I thought about it, but I don't know." So I guess, I don't know maybe just hearing suggestions you know, it makes me think about it even more.

Like their own teachers, participants also talked about educators and mentors they had outside of the classroom who also modeled the importance of education. Other people in the participants' lives served important roles to connect them to engagement activities within education. Six of the participants said that their friends recommended particular engagement activities. Three participants reported that family members recommended such involvement. I describe these engagement activities in the next section.

### **Engagement Activities**

Engagement activities played an important role in giving the participants experiences working with children, which led them to major in elementary education. These activities consisted of programs or opportunities related to education. Students held positions as after-school leaders, summer program leaders, coaches, babysitters, interns, tutors, paraprofessional tutors, Sunday school teachers, and as school aides. Brycen shared,

After working with the after-school program for so long and working with the kids, you know I was thinking, [it's] something I enjoy, working with the kids, and like helping them learn and I just thought you know, maybe I should be a teacher.

Four of the participants said that it was not until they worked with children, or when they did and people encouraged them to pursue teaching, that they thought of becoming teachers.

Shane, a student who worked as an after-school program leader, said,

A friend of mine who also worked with me, . . . he was an elementary education major . . . and he said “Why don’t you become an elementary education major?” And I never really thought about that. And he said you know you work well with the students. . . . I think he thought it could be right up my alley. So that’s why, he kinda influenced me.

### **Fit as an Elementary Teacher**

The participants reported that part of their decisions to major in elementary education involved their assessment of how good a fit this was for them. This occurred after their experiences as K-12 students and participating in various engagement activities. The participants reflected on their past experiences and connected them to their future career goals. They described their personalities, roles and responsibilities, competencies, skills, and other positive characteristics that they considered as they reflected on becoming a teacher. They also discussed why they chose elementary education over other teaching degrees.

**Personality.** Ten of the participants discussed aspects of their personalities that they saw as fitting with being an elementary school teacher. Students described these aspects of their personalities as including being positive, having good energy, being silly, and having enthusiasm when working with children. Participants also mentioned their patience with children, and empathy. Three students said that they liked to be in control, and could apply this to being in control of their own classroom as a teacher one day. Eleven of the participants said they enjoyed helping others. Ren said, “I really like to help people and enable people and empower them, and so I really saw myself, I saw my personality” as fitting with education.

**Role and responsibility as a teacher.** Five of the participants said that as elementary school teachers, they liked that they will build a foundation for children. They also said that the profession gave them the opportunity to mold and shape children to become good people. Four

of the participants recognized that they were working with the future generation and that they wanted to be able to inspire and guide students. Tammy said,

Specifically it makes me feel proud. And it's not like this bragging kind of pride, it's like, I know I have this responsibility and who else can say that they touched the future? . . . I mean, yeah, okay maybe engineers, you know they're creating all this technology, like okay you are creating the now, but I am forming the people who are going to replace you. (laughs) You know what I mean? Like I feel like that's such an awesome thing.

Two participants believed that it was important to be able to provide a safe space for children and to be aware of a student's home life. Six of them expressed that by being a teacher, they could make a difference in a child's life.

Participants also shared that their current program was often difficult with a lot of work and field practice, but most responded that going through a lot of work now would help them become better equipped teachers and that they wanted to be the best teachers for their students. Four participants chose to pursue not only the general elementary education degree, but also the special education or early childhood tracks. These students said that they would be able to better serve a diverse population of students.

**Competence and skills.** The participants discussed the skills that they either possessed or were willing to work on in order to be effective teachers. Two participants shared that they had an ability to explain new content to students and that was a useful skill as a teacher. Three participants mentioned that they would be able to integrate their creative side as teachers when creating curriculum or setting up their classroom. Brooke shared a story of her friend who argued that with the Common Core state standards now, there was no creativity in teaching. Brooke responded, "Well, there is creativity, you have to use the standards to guide your lesson. But then

you use your own . . . twist on them to help the kids ‘cause you know the students better.” One participant also said she had experience communicating with parents and felt that it was a skill that came naturally to her when she had to resolve unpleasant situations.

**Positive characteristics of the profession.** The participants discussed positive characteristics of becoming teachers. All of the participants said they enjoyed working with children and had fun doing it. Two of the participants also felt honored to be a teacher and saw it as a noble profession. One participant shared that he thought that children could be funny, too. Eight participants also said that it was rewarding to help students learn. Kay shared her experience working as a basketball coach:

Oh, it’s so rewarding! You see them, teach them one skill. And then for them to make that skill and to incorporate it into the game, you see your actual product of your training. That feeling is so, I guess it’s what keeps me going in that aspect. Where it’s like . . . my battery fuel. Where it’s just like at the end of the day, if I did this, then I recharge.

**Lack of fit with previous majors.** Nine out of the twelve participants had pursued other majors or fields in college before becoming elementary education majors. These participants had originally pursued the following majors: nursing, culinary arts, English, kinesiology, biochemistry, criminal justice, automotive technology, and psychology. The students said that they pursued these other majors for various reasons. They had enjoyed aspects of their original majors, had family members in those fields, or had related experiences growing up. One student said that a previous college did not have elementary education as an option, so English was chosen instead with the intention of teaching English in high school.

The participants shared why they left those other majors or fields. Experiences or activities in the field made four of them realize that aspects of their earlier majors did not fit with what they wanted. Kailee shared,

So initially I started off as a biochemistry major. Because throughout my whole entire high school career, I was focused on medicine and like I was really involved in HOSA [a health professional organization] and like volunteering at hospitals, and shadowing. So I thought that's what I wanted to do for a really long time. And then I had an internship. . . . I think it was that internship that like really changed it. It's like I saw what pediatricians do. And like, you should see them for like five minutes. And then it's over! Like it wasn't what I wanted, like I wanted to like converse with them and deal with them on a daily basis.

Five participants also did not do well academically in another major or thought that their first choice of program was too competitive. One student shared that she had an appointment with an advisor who discouraged her from going into her initial field because of her performance in the program.

Three participants said that they explored other possibilities in the period between their original major and becoming an elementary education major. They took classes in different fields, but did not enjoy those fields. Others could not really see themselves pursuing those fields based on the fit of the major. Brycen shared,

I was thinking maybe like a business degree, some kind of accounting or something. Just because that's what everyone else is doing. And then the money is there too . . . . Yeah, my friends are doing it. But it's just like, it was just to do it just to get a job kind of thing, Or just to get out of school. So I wasn't like super into it.



**Choosing elementary over other age groups.** Because I chose to focus on elementary education majors, I wanted to understand why the participants chose elementary education and not other teaching degrees, such as secondary education. This section highlights characteristics of elementary education that participants mentioned as influencing their decision-making. All of the participants said that they worked better with children or had more experience working with younger students than older ones. One recurring theme was that the participants did not want to work with middle or high school students because they did not want to deal with students' attitudes or the "drama" that occurs during those years. I further inquired about the difference between older students' attitudes compared to younger students. Faith shared,

Elementary students are a lot easier to handle because they are still learning how to control their emotions . . . versus secondary . . . I think this is the age where students start to act up for attention and for their peers to think of them as "cool."

Six participants also shared that they liked that children were eager to learn new things. Five said that they felt that elementary school children were more moldable and that their mindsets were not set yet, compared to older students. The participants believed that as elementary school teachers, they could mold elementary students to become better secondary students, and even better adults.

A couple of the participants also recalled how they acted in high school, and that they would not want to work with students of that age group. One student said that a less important reason to him was that elementary students were not as physically strong as older students, so if students became unruly, he could more easily manage such conflicts. In relation to working with the attitude of older students, three participants also mentioned how they would have a hard time handling classrooms of teenagers.

Participants also mentioned that they did not like how high school teachers have multiple periods of classes and taught only one subject. They preferred to have one group for a longer period of time in order to build connections with the same students. One participant also mentioned that high school was not preferable given that secondary teachers had to grade the same papers on the same topic, but with elementary students it would be different subjects. That person expressed that younger students also needed more help.

### **Challenges**

The participants discussed challenges they faced and needed to overcome as they decided to enter elementary education. They also described strategies that they used to cope with these deterrents. A couple of participants said that being a teacher could create a lot of pressure because there were expectations around working with children. Brycen shared,

I think it's a lot of pressure. 'Cause I mean, you have . . . the education of . . . how many people's kids, you know? And . . . how you teach them is pretty much what they can remember for the rest of their lives. . . . So I feel like it's, it's a little stressful.

Two participants mentioned that teaching itself requires a lot of work, some of it being outside of school, and with that came little pay. Tammy said that sometimes in the field, it was easy to lose sight of your purpose. She explained,

It's almost like a doctor, you know? You have these clients, these little people, they hate you. But you want the best for them. And you know, it's almost like this huge like, your job is full of ingratitude, from the people you spend every day with. At the beginning at least. And you have to like work your way into their hearts, and that's the art of it I think.

Another participant said he heard that report cards were “not fun” because you have to write comments and explain why you gave a student a certain grade.

Eight participants expressed that classroom management was an important skill to develop when working with a diverse range of students. When talking about the difference between working as an after-school leader and becoming a teacher, Brycen said,

I know there's gonna be a difference, but I just gotta learn when to switch it on and off, you know? Yeah, like being friends-ish and you know hanging out with them and at the same time being a teacher and you know it's time to learn.

Others shared that there are certain subject areas they could get better in. Faith said she had a bad experience with teachers in the past, and thought she didn't want to be that teacher. She explained,

I guess when I had those kind of teachers, they just don't care and . . . I just thought about it and like, "what if I would be a teacher like that?" But now that I'm thinking about it, like I'm in the program, that's something I would not do. So I like learned from that. And learned what not to do and what not to say and control my, not my attitude but my, my gestures and my tone of voice and stuff. And so, yeah I just, when I see that, I was just like, "No, I don't wanna do that, or be like them."

Another thing some participants worried about was working with parents. Shane mentioned, "I just don't want to have any, create any bad relationships with parents because it could affect the student, definitely." When I asked how he would overcome that, he said, "I probably overcome any parent conflicts by making them realize that we both want what's best for the student. You know you want your student to have a good education, so do I."

A student shared that because he was a male teacher and they learned about child abuse, he was worried that he might be seen as a predator or have an ulterior motive when working with students. Another participant was worried about job security, in case the school went on a strike.

Someone else mentioned wanting to work under administrators who cared about the students and academics because she felt that there were some who might not focus on students holistically.

**Strategies to overcome challenges.** The participants also shared strategies or ways they overcame some of the challenges they mentioned. Eight of them mentioned having an open mindset and knowing that they could practice and get better at certain skills they might not be good at right now. Ren said,

Because I knew I wanted to, and I'm going to complete [the program] then it was more of a, "Okay here's an obstacle, how am I gonna get over it?" not, "Oh is it too big? Should I turn around?"

Others also felt that, in the end, they were making a difference in children's lives and that it was meaningful to the participants. When asked about teachers' salaries being an issue, Jessica said, "Oh I'm not going into it for the money. I like working with kids. I like that you know it's a mutual, you know you can get something out of it from your kids also." One person also shared that he might have to gain more experience in the field and dealing with certain situations before deciding whether or not he would actually become a teacher.

### **Making the Decision to Major in Elementary Education**

While deliberating about their decisions to major in elementary education, participants contacted their past teachers, educators in the family, mentors, and advisors for guidance and support. Taylor said,

I asked teachers from my high school about their experiences. About being a teacher and if they thought, knowing who I am as a student, if that would be a good position for me. I talked to my parents and that was just about it. And we sort of came to the conclusion

that knowing who I am, and where I've been, that teaching is probably the best job for who I am.

Other people, including family and friends, also encouraged students to major in elementary education.

All of the participants mentioned moments of self-reflection when they thought about pursuing elementary education. These moments often occurred after students decided to switch from their previous major or field. Ren shared the moment he decided to pursue elementary education after pursuing automotive technology. He said,

I was just sitting in my car. And it was just like, just a super bad semester. And I was like, I don't wanna do this for the rest of my life. So I mean, just within five or ten minutes, I really took a step back and looked at my life . . . I just remember sitting in my car, like totally beaten emotionally, mentally and just like, you know thinking about what I really wanted to do. And at that moment too, it was a really big risk because I was still unsure. I just knew that was the next thing I wanted to pursue, and it worked out.

Five students reported that they reflected on the amount of time it would take to complete their degrees when making their major choice. Two of the participants took a break from college altogether and decided to come back to school when they were ready for it mentally and emotionally. Jackson shared that when he was first in college he thought he "would be some kind of education major," but then dropped out after having a difficult time. He said that when he returned to college,

I kind of got my life sorted out. More like, I got diagnosed with ADHD and some other processing issues and then like after that, I kind of started learning how to deal with it. And how to prevent myself from you know, getting the first experience [in college]."

Overall, the participants said they had mostly positive reactions from others after they decided to major in elementary education. Brooke, who changed majors, said,

Everyone seemed really happy with the decision. ‘Cause I think I kind of, I didn’t get like depressed, but I wasn’t myself when I was in nursing. And now I’m more myself. Where it’s like more, like I’m happy. I love it. It’s so much fun. And I think like, my roommate’s more happy, like, “okay she’s back,” like, “she’s good,” then my parents were good with it. They liked the change.”

Although some family, friends, and other people who made up students’ support systems encouraged participants to pursue elementary education, for other participants, these same types of people questioned or doubted their major choice. Six participants mentioned that when they shared that they were going into teaching, other people reacted by saying that teachers do not get paid a lot. Seven participants also made comments that implied they were aware that they might not get paid a lot, but they still wanted to pursue an elementary education degree. Kailee, who originally pursued the medical field, said,

Like towards the beginning, it was really hard for me ‘cause like my parents were kinda like, they thought that being a teacher was so great. But, they were like, “Oh the money, and all that.” Just, why are you always thinking about the money? Like, I felt like it was really frustrating, trying to like tell people, especially like them thinking, “Oh you were going into the medical field, like why do you want to be a teacher now?”

Kailee also shared that some teachers she talked to also had a negative view towards teaching and questioned her choice.

Three students shared that some people who doubted their decision to become a teacher changed their minds once they saw the participants' involvement or enjoyment in teaching.

Denise shared,

So for my Dad, he kind of at first didn't agree with the career choice I wanted. 'Cause he felt like I could do so much more with myself. But later on, . . . he noticed that I was really enjoying what I was doing. So he accepted it anyway.

Another student said that as a male pursuing teaching, he got more praise from women, but questioned more from men. Jackson talked about how his coworkers reacted:

All the guys are just like, I think actually they've become really accepting of it. They think it's good now. But usually, I just ignore it or I don't know, ask them if they've ever had a male teacher in their grade school, and most of them have, at least one or two. . . . If it's a positive experience for them, then I guess they usually understand it more."

### **Validation of Decision to Major in Elementary Education**

Although I did not initially seek to investigate students' experiences in the teacher preparation program, I found that their experiences as they transitioned into the program and while in the program served to validate and challenge their decision to major in elementary education.

**Transition into elementary education program.** All of the participants said that the elementary education program itself was difficult and demanding. One participant shared that she did not have as much experience as some other people in her cohort, so that initially made her a little nervous. Three students expressed that they were not able to work or had to reduce hours in order to be in the program, so money was an issue. One student commented that if the

program were easier, more teachers might enter the field. Denise, who attended the teaching program at Leeward Community College shared,

I think just going into, like starting at Leeward, was a good transition. But I feel like it was so different. The rigor was really different. Because I feel like it was, well it was still challenging at Leeward but it wasn't to the extent that I'm going through right now. In Mānoa's program. So I feel like if I had more background on what to expect here, it would have been kind of a better transition.

Those who did not have any experience in the classroom said that transitioning to the program was also different from working with children in other settings.

Although the students felt that it was a lot of work, all of them saw it as good preparation for becoming a teacher. Jessica said, "I think it prepares you for the field. I think it over-prepares you which is good 'cause you know what to expect." Students also saw how the curriculum applied to their fieldwork. Brooke, who enrolled in both general elementary education and special education, shared,

It's hard 'cause we have to learn from the SPED perspective and Gen Ed. So it's a lot. I feel it's a lot of information thrown at us, but now it's all connecting. Like it's starting to connect, this makes sense, and we're applying it in field."

Shane shared that he appreciated the cohort structure of the program. He said,

While it is emotionally, mentally exhausting, I just gotta always keep in mind that it's a big adjustment and while it is also a big adjustment and so much is going on, I think that's why the program here intentionally puts us in cohorts. So you know a bunch of us go through all of this. We work together, we have fun together, we even stress together. But the bottom line is that it's together.



Eight of the participants shared experiences and lessons they gained from working in the field. Taylor reflected on the field experience by saying,

And being that our program is both field experience and classroom starting from Day 1 is amazing to me . . . but definitely it's been very impactful and very enlightening. I don't think that, had I not had field, that I would have the same experience or the same thought process on being an educator.

Kay expressed that by being in field, she could see the difference between working with lower and upper elementary students. She said,

I still feel like, in the lower grades, we have a community. . . . They try to encourage community. Whereas, in the upper grades, it's more, it's not. And you're having to single out students for certain, they have it where you have to give positive reinforcement . . . . I have to do all this singling out and i'm just like, hmmm. I'm still adjusting to that part.

Kay also shared that she saw differences working in two different schools so far. She said,

Another thing is, I was actually at two different schools. Two different areas, where I had one area where they had more of a family, positive base. Where now I'm at a school where it's, these kids, their biggest concern isn't with their homework. Isn't with making it to school. It's what they go home to everyday. That's what they face and that's hard for me to even deal with, and i'm not dealing with it at all, you know? It's hard for me to say, "Okay so this happened to you, now where's your homework?" So in that aspect, it's harder too.

When asked how students could prepare for the program transition, there were mixed responses. Two students who did not have classroom experience said that volunteering or shadowing a teacher in a classroom might have helped. One participant shared that she thought

the prerequisite courses could have better prepared her for the program by being more difficult. One student said that he wished the community college he attended did a better job in advising for the program. He said,

I think, just at Windward, maybe if they understood better, the education program here.

‘Cause they’re like, the counselors I don’t know, like, “Oh, I don’t think you need to take anything.” Until I finally started talking to someone here. And they’re like oh you have to do this, this and I like, so I had to postpone . . . But, almost everyone I know from

Windward that came to this program had a really hard time because of that.

Kay shared that she wished she could have seen the course requirements for the courses in the program to see what was expected of her. Two other students felt that there was nothing you could do to fully prepare for teaching.

**Parental Experience.** Kay and Tammy shared that in addition to being students in the program, they were also parents. They said that this influenced their commitment to the program, the way they interacted with students in the field, and how they related to the parents of their students. Kay mentioned that when choosing to major in elementary education, she liked the idea of possibly being her daughter’s teacher, but she considered it as a bonus and not a main source of motivation for becoming an elementary teacher. Tammy had to give up working because she had a son and would not be able to balance having a child, completing the education program, and working. She shared that she was already committed to finishing school before she got pregnant, but was determined to do whatever it took to finish the bachelor’s program. Tammy also believed that being a parent influenced her quality of work in the program. She said that with more time and energy, she could be a better student, but that she would never give up being a parent.

When I inquired about how her viewpoint as a parent influenced her becoming a teacher, Kay shared that she had two mentors who had differing opinions about being a parent and a teacher. One mentor, who was a mother, told her to value the unique perspectives she had as a student, a teacher, and as a mother. However, another mentor told her to be cautious about how she addressed students. That mentor explained that teachers who were parents needed to consider that what they might do or say to their own children might be different from what they do and say to students as professionals. When I asked about preparing for teaching, Tammy said,

I mean having kids of your own is helpful, but again, it's so different at the same time. Dealing with someone else's kid, you know? I mean it makes you sensitive to the ways you deal with things, but you can't always predict the way other parents handle their own kids.

Kay shared that as a mother, she realized that children have their time at school, but also have a home life. She said,

I know my daughter has a home life. If something bad goes down at home, then she's gonna carry that to school. I have that understanding. But I don't know if it's the same for people who don't have kids. I feel like I have that extra component.

Tammy also shared that she attended a recognition assembly where children got awards with their parents present, and she cried during the assembly. She said,

I think being a parent influenced, I think if I didn't have my own kid, I don't think I wouldn't care as much. But I think because I know the parents feeling of feeling proud of their kid, and I would like to imagine I know what the kid's feeling when you know, they're on the stage and just like glowing like that.

**Teaching in Hawai‘i.** I recruited participants who were enrolled in a teacher preparation program in Hawai‘i, and the students shared experiences related to the uniqueness of teaching in Hawai‘i. Five of the participants said that teaching in Hawai‘i meant working with a diverse range of students. Jackson, who was not from Hawai‘i, said

It’s the same reason why I don’t ever really want to move is, the diversity. And the amount of things you get to learn . . . . And I think it’s like really cool that everyone embraces it here. And emphasizing it too. ‘Cause like where I grew up, it’s very homogenous.

Similarly, Tammy shared,

The diversity in this classroom is crazy. You get kids who live in the low income and you get kids . . . they have jewelry and they’re wearing make-up in second grade. And they have like brand new shoes every other week, or every month you know. And then the kids who live you know in the low income wear the same shirt to school every week and same shoes from last year or shoes that are five sizes too big because they have to grow into them.

Tammy further explained that as a teacher she “get[s] to know the different kids and learn about them and . . . bridge the gap between the two or more than two extremely different . . . economic status of students that you have in the classroom.”

Six of the participants felt that Hawai‘i has a welcoming atmosphere and felt like a big family. Taylor, who was not originally from Hawai‘i, shared,

To teach here in Hawai‘i is to teach, I think equality. There’s so much diversity, there’s so many different ways of thinking, so many different cultures and religions. And it’s just one giant family. And I think that here in Hawai‘i, it’s just really important and that

notion of family and support is so prevalent that teaching here is, is like helping a neighbor.

Another student said “The [teachers’] union here is so amazing. It’s like a family and it’s like, everybody has each other’s backs and they really do advocate for your best interest.”

### **Discussion**

This study provided insight into the motivation and decision-making processes of first year elementary education majors at UHM. Unlike past research that studied motivation of major choice in general (Beggs et al., 2008; Liao & Ji, 2015), I looked specifically at the context of elementary education majors and studied how specific sources of motivation influenced this group of students. In this section, I discuss the model I developed regarding students’ decisions to major in elementary education. I compare my model and specific findings to other theories and research. I also describe implications for practice, discuss the study’s limitations, and suggest ideas for future research.

#### **Model’s Fit with Other Theories**

I developed the model from grounded theory data from elementary education majors at the UHM. It adds to the literature on major choice by being more specific to the field of elementary education and also for teacher candidates in Hawai‘i. Because the focus was on elementary education, the model specifically addresses interactions between students’ experiences, influence of others, and engagement activities. The model is more detailed than what is found in the literature because it focuses on one specific major. The model is also unique in that it presents the period between early experiences and choice of major, which includes students’ consideration of the fit of the major and possible challenges. The challenges that the participants mentioned are specific to the major and career. Challenges may include the need to

improve teacher-related skills or the realization of the way teachers may be perceived. My model is also unique for its inclusion of students' validation of fit once they entered their program. Previous research on why students switched majors did focus on reasons students did not feel that a major fit with their college or career goals (Malgwi et al., 2005). However, the current model is unique in the way it emphasizes the role of the students' program in validating their major choice.

**Motivational preferences.** The model I developed is similar to the organization of motivational preferences, suggested by Liao and Ji (2015). Liao and Ji looked at differences between college students' personal preferences, others' preferences, career preferences, and institutional preferences when choosing their college majors. The reputation of particular institutions influenced students' preferences for certain programs. Although the participants in the current study distinguished the variables in Liao and Ji's study, they also described ways that the variables interacted and overlapped with one another. The data suggested that personal interests and motivation were constantly changing based on students' environments and the people in their lives. Whereas Liao and Ji did not study how students developed their preferences, my model describes how students' engagement activities helped to develop their preferences.

**FIT-Choice.** My model is similar to the "FIT-Choice" framework developed by Richardson and Watt (2006). The FIT-Choice model focused on the choice of a teaching career and how socialization influenced expectancy values and other constructs related to teaching. The present study focused more on the college major choice rather than the career choice, though the motivational variables were similar. My study also found additional challenges that students faced that were not mentioned in Richardson and Watt's study.

**Psychosocial Theory.** The model I developed also relates to Erikson's (1968) Psychosocial Theory. In the current study, the period before students chose a major was characterized by their consideration of the fit of the major and challenges they might face. Erikson described such a time as a crisis because individuals had to choose among many different options and alternatives (Marcia, 1967). As an extension of Erikson's theory, Marcia (1967) described different identity outcomes. The most positive outcome was identity achievement which resulted from a moratorium, when people explored their options and questioned what authorities suggested they should do, and then committed to a decision. When students made a commitment to a major without going through a moratorium, Marcia would call this foreclosure. Lastly an identity diffusion status would be labeled for students who did not commit to a major and did not go through a crisis.

**Growth Mindset.** As described by Dweck (2006), some participants showed a growth mindset towards teaching. Growth mindset is defined as having the belief that qualities are not fixed and can be developed "through [one's] efforts, [one's] strategies, and help from others" (Dweck, 2006, p. 7). An extension of the growth mindset concept, resilience, or the students' positive responses to challenges, was shown when they described skills they needed to improve on, such as working with parents, but were willing to practice and get better in order to become effective teachers (Yeager and Dweck, 2012).

In the following sections, I describe specific findings from the study and compare them to previous research and theory. Specifically, I discuss the results regarding (a) personal interests, (b) job or career characteristics, (c) intrinsic and altruistic motivation, (d) social support and dissuasion, and (e) validation of fit.

## **Personal Interests**

Past student experiences, influence from others, and engagement activities served as important sources that guided students to choose elementary education. These sources helped students to see if elementary education was the right fit for them. Researchers found that personal interest in a subject was influential in major choice, but former studies did not focus on how these interests developed (Liao & Ji, 2015; Malgwi et al., 2005). Some teacher motivation literature did report findings of perceived qualities and attributes of teachers (Manuel & Hughes, 2006) and some did touch upon possible ways students developed their preferences (Barmby, 2006; Moran et al., 2001). Results from the current study suggested that students' personal interests developed from their experiences as K-12 students and participation in activities related to education that brought them joy. Other people were also influential, as they informed participants about education or observed students' enjoyment in related activities.

## **Job and Career Characteristics**

I found that students considered job and career characteristics when deciding on their major. These data gave insight into how students connected their own experiences to fit with perceived characteristics of the teaching profession. Students recognized that they possessed qualities or skills that would be beneficial in the teaching profession, but also identified areas that they needed to improve. They believed that being able to work in the field and having a difficult program gave them additional insight and preparation to succeed in their future career. The results of this study were similar to those of past research in that the candidates viewed the opportunity to work with children and to make a difference as aspects of teaching that attracted them to the major (Moran et al., 2001; Richardson & Watt, 2006). However, I also found unique reasons regarding students' preferences for elementary over other levels of education. This



included the ability to set a foundation for children and to mold and shape them at a younger age. The participants also disliked the attitudes and behaviors of older students and the academic structure of high school environments.

### **Intrinsic and Altruistic Motivations**

Like past research on types of motivation, students in this study reported more intrinsic and altruistic motivations for going into teaching such as having rewarding experiences working with kids and finding a career that fit their personal strengths and personalities (Barmby, 2006; Kyriacou & Coulthard, 2000; Manuel & Hughes, 2006; Moran et al., 2001; Richardson & Watt, 2006). Students expressed that extrinsic factors such as having adequate pay were on their minds, but that intrinsic and altruistic reasons were more influential.

### **Social Support and Dissuasion**

I looked for ways that others supported students' decisions to go into elementary education or ways that they showed dissuasion. Others, such as family members and friends, played an important role in introducing the participants to engagement activities. Sometimes this occurred before students showed interest in working with children or in the education field. These other people also played a role in recognizing students' enjoyment or skills in related activities and explicitly providing words of encouragement. Although students themselves made the choice, they found value in asking others for advice. Students also found that dissuasion came from others in the form of questioning or doubting their decision.

Bayer (2009) interviewed Hawai'i professionals about why they chose to send their children to either public or private schools. She found that, "parents in this study describe a community-held belief that private schools have a higher social status than public schools" (Bayer, 2009, p. 154). There was a social narrative that private schools were for the elite and

public schools were for the workers or people of lower status. This narrative regarding Hawai'i public schools may have attributed to the social dissuasion of becoming a teacher in Hawai'i.

Participants were also influenced by former teachers. I view this as related to Bandura's (1989) Social Cognitive Theory. Bandura emphasized the role of learning from models. All participants were exposed to a classroom environment from a young age, so they were familiar with the roles of a teacher. Former teachers served both as positive and also as negative models regarding what the participants did or did not want to become.

### **Validation of Fit in Education and Other Majors**

Unlike previous research, this study also focused on majors or fields that students considered and how these considerations played a role in their choosing to major in elementary education. It showed that even when participants were exposed to experiences as students that initially inspired them to study elementary education or gained experiences through engagement activities, nine of them initially pursued other majors and later switched to elementary education. According to a study by the National Center for Education Statistics, within three years of initial enrollment, about one third of undergraduates in bachelor's degree programs changed their major at least once (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Data from the current study showed the importance of students questioning their fit in a field and realizing aspects that did not fit with what they wanted.

Once students enrolled in the teacher education program, their experiences in the program served to validate their major choice. Students shared that the program was more difficult than they thought it would be, but they were able to connect what they were learning to their future profession. They said that these experiences were preparing them to be better teachers. Participants also displayed high self-efficacy regarding skills they needed to develop.

They also recognized the support they received within their program and within the context of teaching in Hawai‘i.

**Program experiences that promoted skills working with diverse students.**

Participants in the current study reflected that their program exposed them to a culturally diverse group of students in their field placements, and they viewed this in positive ways. Exposure to diversity was noted by both students who were from Hawai‘i and those who were not.

Participants appreciated that Hawai‘i as a state was diverse, generally welcoming of diversity, and emphasized treating people like family. This can be an advantage for teachers. New teachers who value cultural diversity and have the skills to instruct students from diverse backgrounds may be more successful. For example, the Kahua Induction Program assisted new teachers to learn about the cultural context of Hawai‘i and emphasized the importance of culture-based education (Kahumoku & Kekahio, 2010). Teachers who were new to the islands and who participated in the program had higher retention rates than other educators who did not participate.

**Implications**

The results of this study suggest that higher education advisors should ask students to imagine themselves working as a teacher (or in any profession) and inquire why they envision it as a good fit. It also suggests that education advisors ask students about any hesitancy or discouragement they feel about going into teaching. This may help to clarify miscommunication and may provide advisors with opportunities to inform students about what they will learn in a particular program. Students should know that they do not necessarily need to enter their programs with all the skills needed for a field.

Helping students understand exactly what skills are needed for a particular profession may help them see if the field is a good fit for them. I found that some of the participants identified as having learning issues or misbehaviors growing up, so it should not be assumed that only those who were high performing and well-behaved as students will become teachers. Students can be influenced by both good and bad educational experiences.

For students in the process of deciding on a major, findings from this study suggest that asking people who know the student well to provide insight on what qualities or skills they see in the student can be helpful. Also, if students want to enter a field, but are met with negative reactions from others, advisors can suggest that students participate in activities to show their competencies or enjoyment and that might help others see the major choice in a new light. It is important for the student to have time for self-reflection and to accumulate related experiences in the field. For those who lack experience in a field, advisors can suggest that students seek engagement activities to discover aspects of the field that they like and what may be challenges, as well. Lastly, the data suggests there are differences between challenges students are willing to improve on and those that they are not, so it is recommended to choose a field with challenges students can see themselves working on.

### **Limitations**

Participation in these interviews was voluntary. Therefore, I may have only recruited students who were comfortable sharing their stories. I may have missed information from students who were not as engaged or committed to their major choice. All of the participants were enrolled in the UHM College of Education elementary education program. Although participants were in different cohorts, the information from this study cannot be generalized to all elementary education majors and programs. Another limitation is that these results were based

on student perceptions, and their statements might have been different from their actual behaviors.

### **Future Research**

Future research could compare student responses to actual behavior in the field by studying a student's perceived competence in teaching and compare it to observable behavior. A longitudinal study with the participants may also be beneficial to see whether their perceptions of the field changes after graduating or after their first years of teaching. Researchers may also be interested in studying students in prerequisite courses or who are thinking of applying to the teaching program to further understand this decision-making process.

This study also found that students gave unique responses based on specific identities. For example, some of the participants were teacher candidates from Hawai'i and others were not. Some of the participants discussed their experiences being male teacher candidates. The participants who were parents also shared insight on how being a parent affected their teaching. Future research may focus on these unique identities and further explore how they affect students who are interested in becoming teachers.

Students in this study also mentioned their perceptions of elementary education and other teaching degrees. Future research could interview other education majors, such as secondary education majors, to better inform why students choose those majors and inquire why they did not choose elementary education. Researchers could also interview students in other fields who left education or almost majored in it to find out reasons that made them choose another field over teaching.

Because this program required students to take prerequisite courses and have documented group or field leadership experience before applying, it would be interesting to study other

majors or programs that do not have these kind of requirements and how that affects a student's decision-making process. Participants in this study reflected on their past experiences working with children and being a student themselves and how these experiences affected their major decision. Future research may choose to focus on how students in other fields gain experience before deciding on a major. Along the same lines, because this particular elementary education program is a highly structured cohort program and professional school leading to a job in teaching, it would be interesting to compare these findings to majors that are more flexible and fluid in job choice after graduation (i.e., social sciences). Lastly because perceived fit of the major was an important part of this study, future studies could see if perceived fit matches with the actual major or with professions after graduation.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, students in the elementary education program at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa integrated their past experiences to form a conscious decision to major in elementary education. Students went through a period of self-reflection to find out whether the major fit with who they were and if the challenges were worth overcoming. This gives insight into the motivation and decision-making process of choosing elementary education over other possible options.

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## Appendix

### Pre-interview Questions

Name:

Age:

Gender:

Race/Ethnicity:

Major:

### Interview Questions

1. Can you describe your experience in education and how you came to become an elementary education major?
2. Who or what influenced you to major in elementary education?
3. Was there a specific moment when you decided to major in elementary education? Please explain.
4. Why did you pursue elementary education and not other age groups?
5. Did you participate in any engagement activities related to education? (program, volunteering, job shadowing, assisting, etc.) If so, how did they affect your decision to major in elementary education?
6. Did you seek help from any informational resources? (websites, brochures, advising, professional talk, etc.) If so, how did they affect your decision to major in elementary education?
7. Were there any other types of experiences not previously mentioned that helped you decide on this major?
8. What do other people think of your decision?

9. Were there any deterring reasons that may have kept you from majoring in elementary education? If so, how did you overcome them?
10. Now that you are in the program, to what extent has it met your expectation? And how does it fit with who you are?
11. Did you feel prepared to make this decision? Is there anything else that could have helped you make this decision?
12. Were you considering other majors besides elementary education? Why did you decide on elementary education compared to the others?
13. What are your future plans with an education degree?